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a place called home

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a place called home

foreword

This series of poems is in part a response to Wendell Berry. Infused in Berry's work is a strong sense of place; these are evident particularly in the books *Hannah Coulter* and *A Place on Earth*. The subject matter of Berry's book *The Hidden Wound* is also extremely relevant to this sequence, for I feel that Berry's discussion of race deserves a response.

Berry insists that it is possible to choose one place, and call it home. He mourns the loss of this practice in modern society, particularly through the trope of children leaving the small town and the agrarian society to move to the city. Yet as a young adult living in a season of transition, it is difficult to resonate strongly with this idea. Berry leaves me with difficult questions - is it possible to find one place to call home? If it is possible, must that home be a person's hometown?

I also want to discuss place as a cultural feeling. Do Berry's ideas about place and home hold up when we include the idea of race into them? For example, what do people do when they are culturally (and racially) disconnected from the place they live? In *The Hidden Wound*, Berry mentions an African-American family who were descended from freed slaves. They eventually moved away from the town they had lived in for generations, because it would never be their home, no matter how long they lived there. Even within Berry's own work, it is certainly possible for a person can feel culturally out of place in the place she or he was born. I find it is difficult to completely swallow Berry's framework of land and place, because it creates a simplistic picture of the human sense of belonging.

This series is not written only to challenge Berry, though I hope it does. I also seek to share some of my own perspective. As an Asian-American, with a Caucasian father and a Korean mother, I often feel caught between the two cultures, searching for a place to call home, one that offers acceptance for both my Korean and American heritage.

I know that I am raising hard and uncomfortable questions in this reflection and through my poetry, and I also recognise that I do not answer many of these questions. But it is beneficial to sit with discomfort, to let it converse in our hearts, to understand that answers are not always available for the questions that plague us. I have sought to write in a posture of grace, and I hope you read it with the same generosity in your hearts. This is an unfinished work, one of processing, seeking, and one day, of finding.

- Genevieve 수년 Hartman

“a place called home”

it feels, sometimes,
like i have searched my
whole life to find
a place to belong,
to call home -

to be seen
first as human,
not confined to Asian,
to feel
recognition without expectation.

perhaps i didn't
always know
that i needed to find
this reconciliation,
within myself and
with the people around me.

yet i know now -
the people themselves
make up the place;
if i cannot
live in harmony with one,
i cannot be at peace with the other.

to find that peace,
that belonging,
is what i long for most.

it feels sometimes,
out of my reach,
just beyond the next hill.

“roller skating”

i stumble slowly, grasp the railing,
uncoordinated and unsteady -
my heart beats fast, loud in my ears
as i lose control of my feet.

once i'm off the rink and reach the rug,
i'm on safe ground again.
i don't worry that i'll slip. here
i catch my breath, inhale dusty sweat.

as i sit, a girl my age comes over to
introduce herself - i've seen her once
or twice this afternoon - she greets me,
so i speak up, respond politely.

then i can see the shift of surprise in her eyes.
the next words that tumble out
leave me as shocked as she was
when first she heard my unaccented words:

“not to be weird, but at first i thought you were chinese.”

the unsteadiness that i felt
when i couldn't control my skate-clad feet
is back; the carpet rolls forward -
her safe ground remains, but mine is lost.

“echoes from the bus”

i sit, the fourteen-year-old
in the corner of the bus,
beside my 할머니 -
we are surrounded by
the wrinkled faces of her friends.

they exclaim rapidly, incoherently,
and point towards me, wild with delight.
i listen uncomfortably, hoping
for the familiarity of English amidst
the overwhelming flood of church-lady glee.
then i hear “예쁜 아가” -
they think I’m a pretty baby.
this is one piece of a long string
of words that I cannot grasp.

finally, 할머니 translates -
her friends are telling me
that i look like her.

mom says that too;
dad always responds that
i favor his sister.

either way, the resemblance
only goes so far.

“the greater cost”

얼마요?

how much is this?

i ask the Korean shopgirl
about the cost of the fan,
carefully trying to hide
my poor accent,
knowing -

i won’t understand
her response and will have
to ask 엄마 for help.

i’m not sure why
i bothered to ask
in the first place -
i don’t know
what i expected.
this place does not
belong to me.

the 부채 is priced at ₩2,000 -
i wonder how much
it will cost me to understand her -
this culture, this language, this land.

“mixed up”

once i was called a “mix.”
at first i didn’t know what to make of it
for no one had ever been so bold
or quite so blunt.

when i thought about it
i felt mixed up inside -

of course there are
different parts of me,
but they are joined together,
mixed
inseparably, intertwining
strands of being

perhaps it is a strange title
but it is a fitting one -
i always have been mixed up.

“standardized tests”

i never know what box to fill
when i’m asked to check
one.

why must i split myself this way?
allow me to
choose two -

why can it not be both for me?
for i am
both at once.

“versus”

things seem to end up this way,
in this rigid form in my mind -
us versus them.

a few words draw
out the visceral feelings
and i scan the room,
searching for faces like my own,
seeing only them, for most
often i am outnumbered.

i long for a time, a
place where it can just be us,
where i'm not expected to have
an authoritative opinion
just because my skin
does not match theirs,
and i am not baited by
opinionated people who have
no real idea what they speak of.

i know there will be a few
in the majority who will
try to sympathize
and understand; it isn't
easy to be different -
but they, like
me, are minorities.

i am tired inside,
and i long to be understood,
in their white sea of faces.

“forgiveness”

how can i forgive
when i don't feel
you deserve or even desire it,
when i am challenged
beyond my limits and
hurt, immeasurably,
by the ink on your pages?

how can i forgive you,
give you mercy,
for what i see as wrong
and you do not defend?

i ask myself
every day, every hour -
this is my reality,
the place i live now.

and i struggle against
all of this - what
is my proper response -
rage? hate? love? pain?

forgiveness?

i don't know, precisely -
but i do know -
i despise being angry,
that hate kills
any hope of love, that
pain is not a satisfactory end.

so i learn to choose -
i pick my
battles and my wars
and i desire to learn,
to be able to grow and
grant grace.

“generosity”

without memory
there would be no grace.
without brokenness
there would be no love.
without pain
there would be no generosity.

so when we are hurt by each other,
when it feels like we will
never hear each other's wearied voices
or see the wounds concealed
by smeared reflections and shame

when that hurt comes,
familiar, expected, inevitable,
i will try to remember -
without that pain,
i could not give undeserved mercy;
i could not learn
generosity.

“someone different”

when you
tell me you are color-blind,
that you don't see race and ethnicity
and see everyone the same,
then proceed to point out my skin color -
it tells me that you
don't actually care to find
reconciliation, because you are too
privileged to understand what you're talking about.

can you see why this is hurtful?

when you
single me out,
ask for my opinion on Chinese politics,
on cultural differences in education
or racism in the west,
just because
my skin is different than yours -
it tells me that
you don't care to understand me as a person,
that you only want my opinion
as an Asian, as someone different.

can you see why i feel like i don't belong?

when you
ask if i'm an international student,
ask where i'm from -
it tells me you assume automatically
that i could not
be just an American,
born and raised,
that because i'm Asian,
i am too different to belong here.

can you see why i find it hard to call this land my home?

“goryeo – 고려”

when i gaze across the globe, i see
a country bound by its division,
where north and south mean the
difference between free life and repression.
how can these wounds heal
after so much war and time?
can splintered pieces of heart and
land join in reconciliation?

*

though efforts may prove
fruitless, when years go by
and feelings do not change,
i find comfort still
for always there is
the chance that one day, the
hopes and growing pains will be enough -

people will change and
a country split in two
will knit together, again one.

*

i see in myself
the same shattered shards -
like my heritage,
i have not yet
reached internal peace;
i do not yet belong to myself.
two parts at once
joined and divided,
forming a broken whole -

i try somehow to fit
fractured edges together

and i will seek until
two cultural halves unite,
fully reconciled,
finally complete.

“green cemeteries”

i will lay down in the green of the cemetery
beside bodies long decayed, and we will be one.
though gender, religion, and race may differ,
we will be here, communing with each other
and the grass we sleep within.

one day the color of my skin and the shape
of my eyes will not matter, and all will lie
in green cemeteries and be one.
the whole world together will share love
and embody peace, communing finally
with one another and our God unseen.

glossary

echoes from the bus:

할머니- pronounced *halmoni*, meaning “Grandma”

예쁜 아기- pronounced *yeppeun agi*, meaning “pretty baby”

the greater cost:

얼마요- pronounced *eolmayo*, meaning “how much?”

엄마- pronounced *eomma*, an informal address, basically meaning “mommy”

부채- pronounced *buchae*, meaning “fan” - the handheld, folding kind used to cool yourself off

₩2,000 - 2,000 won, approximately \$1.75

goryeo:

고려- pronounced *goryeo*, referring to an ancient Korean dynasty that ruled from the 10th to the 14th centuries. Under Goryeo rule, most of the Korean peninsula was unified. The modern “Korea” was derived from this dynastic name.